

Obama suggests federally funded preschool in State of the Union

By: Ben Johnson – February 13, 2013

President Obama signaled his commitment to carry through on his campaign promise of federally subsidized preschool during his State of the Union address last night. Experts warn the policy could be costly and ineffective at best, and potentially harmful to the nation's children and families at worst.

“Tonight, I propose working with states to make high-quality preschool available to every child in America,” he said. “In states that make it a priority to educate our youngest children, like Georgia or Oklahoma, studies show students grow up more likely to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job, and form more stable families of their own.”

“Let’s do what works,” he said, “and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind. Let’s give our kids that chance.”

President Obama included a reference to universal preschool in the nation's first-ever report to the UN Human Rights Council, writing that the Department of Education will “provide low-income students and students of color with increased access to early learning and education.” The report noted that stimulus funds were already “being used to promote high-quality early childhood education.”

However, experts say, despite his persistence, federal preschool programs have at best a limited educational effect that disappears nearly as soon as school begins – and behavioral issues that never go away.

“President Obama’s call to expand government preschool and child care is bad policy,” said Lindsey Burke, the Will Skillman in education policy at the Heritage Foundation. “In all, taxpayers spend an estimated \$25 billion on some 45 federal day care and preschool programs annually.” The most famous of these is Head Start.

However, a “robust body of literature warns that 'fade-out' of academic gains is a common problem.”

Studies show any educational benefit the child received by attending Head Start disappears by the spring of first grade.

“But,” Burke noted, “the negative effects of preschool on children’s behavior remain.”

Researchers at the University of California at Berkeley and Stanford University studied 14,000 students and discovered attending preschool eroded children's social skills and cooperation. The earlier the entrance, the later a child bloomed socially, they found.

Previous studies found children in preschool were more likely to be aggressive, disobedient, and disrespectful to their teachers by the time they reach kindergarten.

Why double-down on a 47-year legacy of failure? “The most plausible (and charitable) explanation is a bad case of wishful thinking,” explained Andrew J. Coulson of the Cato Institute.

“Many people make the mistake of improperly generalizing from two or three tiny preschool programs of earlier decades which *did* show some lasting benefits,” he said. “Sadly the federal government’s nationwide Head Start program has not replicated those benefits despite generations of unrelenting effort.”

Critics note such programs – to have children removed from a parent's care at increasingly early ages and raised by someone employed by the state – seem to run counter to the maternal instinct.

“Demand for new, large-scale government spending on early childhood education and care is not evident,” Burke said. “Families seem to prefer caring for their children at home in their early years. Strong majorities of mothers indicate that they prefer to stay home when their children are young, with 80 percent of mothers who work part-time indicating that is the ideal scenario for them.”

“Instead of increasing federal spending on preschool and day care, the administration should be working to trim duplicative and ineffective programs, and leaving the provision of early childhood education and care to private providers, and most importantly, parents,” she concluded.